

COLONIES THAT FAILED (1895)¹

Text by John Randolph Spears — Correspondent of the *New York Sun*

Original articles archived on nyshistoricnewspapers.org

Edited by Duncan S. Campbell, 2019

RICHES IN CENTRAL AMERICA STILL UNDEVELOPED.

Wreck in Costa Rica of a Yankee Colony from Hornellsville, N. Y., and the cause of It—Great Wealth in Lumber, Coffee, and Bananas—Success of Some Individuals—Probable Effect of the Not Improbable Annexation of the Central American Republics to the United States.

A very interesting experience that I had while knocking about the towns of Costa Rica was the finding of two portions of the wreck of a Yankee colony that had left Hornellsville, N. Y., the year before and had settled on a strip of land on the Atlantic side of the nation. One of the bits of debris, so to speak, was W. H. Reynolds, who was the leading spirit in establishing the colony, and the other was Jacob Herder, who was a plain colonist. Mr. Herder and Mr. Reynolds did not agree in their stories of the wreck. There seemed to have been some ill-feeling among the wrecked arising from the manner of the wrecking. But for the purposes of this article the personal disagreements of those colonists are of very small moment. The undisputed facts are sufficient.

To my mind the most remarkable fact about Central America is, all things considered, that not one successful colony of foreigners has yet been established there; and the more one thinks about it the more remarkable the fact seems. Of the colonizing of the southern part of South America THE SUN has told a little, and a deal more remains to be told. There was the Welsh colony, for instance, that settled in the midst of the Patagonia desert, on the Chubut River, "500 miles

¹ Published by New York Sun, June 2, 1895, page 5

from anywhere," and succeeded after long years of hardship. That was a wonderful case of colonial success, unless, indeed, it is true that physical hardships are necessary to insure success. But Chubut is only one of dozens of successful colonies of foreigners in southern South America. The Argentine, the little Oriental republic (Uruguay), and Chili are full of colonies. Chili is especially notable for its European colonists. As long ago as 1845 one Herr Anwandter established a German colony at Valdivia that succeeded at once. It was in a forest-covered region, but very fertile. The sturdy Germans went to work there as they have gone to work in so many parts of the United States. They cleared the soil and made homes and became citizens of the country of their adoption. Other Germans—thousands of them—came out to the new region where homes could be had for the taking, and now one fourth of all Chile is entirely dominated by the influence of this German element. Valdivia, Concepcion, Victoria, Traiguén, Osorno, and Port Montt are the chief towns of the German region, and everywhere in that part of Chili, German customs and habits, including German energy and thrift, and education are at the foundation of all life and progress. But though German in blood, the colonists are thoroughly Chilean in national allegiance. The most patriotic of Chileans are the youths of German blood born on Chili soil, just as the German blooded citizens of the States show more enthusiasm in celebrating national holidays than New England Yankees. The coming Chilian must be portrayed hereafter with yellow moustache and blue eyes.

How it happened that thousands of sturdy Europeans sailed across the torrid zone and even around the Horn to find homes, instead of going to Central America, may not be past finding out, but it is one of the curious features of the wonderful history of colonization. Certainly, Central America was not ignored because of the soil. None better exists in the world. Nor was it altogether because of the Government, for the rulers of Chili and of the Argentine had all the peculiarities of those of Central America. Perhaps it was the reputation of the climate. Certainly, Central America's reputation for fevers is bad enough, but when one travels there and finds that the fever belt is confined to the low lands along shore, while the high lands are perfectly healthful save only as bad sanitary arrangements in cities bring on zymotic diseases, it is apparent that the climate was not necessarily to blame. At any rate, whatever the cause, Central America is peopled almost exclusively by the mixed Spanish and Indian race

who call themselves Ladinos, while Chili and the Argentine, with the impulse due to immigration are making progress almost as fast as Japan.

And yet almost every traveler in Central America finds places that answer in characteristics to the typical descriptions of paradise. There are landscapes so beautiful that no tongue or pen can be found to do them justice. There are fields and meadows and forest lands of unsurpassed fertility, ready for the handiwork of the agriculturalist. So bountiful is Nature that every stroke of the workman is repaid a hundredfold. Nowhere can human life be sustained with so little labor, and nowhere is the behest "having food and raiment, let us be therewith content" more easily obeyed. Eternal spring prevails, one may almost say, but not eternal sunshine. In the dry season there is sunshine a-plenty, and in the wet there is enough.

It was to this ideal land that the colonists from Hornellsville came, but not to an ideal part of it. On the contrary, a worse spot for a colony of New Yorkers would be hard to find. The one who follows the coastline of Costa Rica east of Limon for forty miles comes to a little bay, fit, they say, for a very good commercial harbor. Here for a good many years an American named Mott has lived, his business being that of a trader with the Indians. Behind the bay is a swamp, a genuine torrid zone swamp, full of rank vegetation and alligators and snakes and malaria. Back of the swamp is ground somewhat higher. It could not be covered out of sight even by high water. It was and is the richest kind of low land soil in the world. It was covered with virgin forest, many of the trees being the best quality of cedar, and many also of the poorer class of mahogany. The cedar, if cut into lumber, would bring a top price in any lumber market. The soil, if cleared and planted with banana shoots, would for ten years produce such bunches of bananas as would make a stevedore's back ache and a fruit buyer's eyes bulge. Like millions of other acres in Central America this land, with its precious trees and its wonderful soil, belonged to a Government whose Executive could not be pleased in any way more than by an application for that land from men who would become actual settlers upon it. Any able-bodied man could have all he could work and welcome—more than welcome. And if any actual settler would take hold of it and induce others to come with him, he could not only have his fair share, but an extra share to pay him for inducing others to come and take a free share.

Just how this opportunity looks to one who does not know all about it needs a little explanation. Thus, a very good sawmill can be delivered and set up on the coast of Central America for \$5,000, or at most \$6,000. A small daily turnout of lumber from this mill would be 3,000 feet, and the lumber piled on the bay would be worth, at a low estimate, \$30 gold a thousand. Pine sells at that price in any West India market, while cedar is worth say double. To the unsophisticated, the taking of a saw mill there is about the shortest road imaginable to an income of \$130 gold a day for the mill owners.

But that is not all. As the land is cleared, bananas may be planted. Now, an acre of that land is estimated to yield 100 bunches of strictly first-class bananas the second year after planting, and these sell at 40 cents a bunch (silver), while forty bunches more, worth 20 cents each, are to be had—in all an income of \$48 for an acre the second year. Thereafter for eight years the land yields just three times as much. This done, it may be turned into grassland, that will yield six to ten tons of hay a year an acre. That is, one acre will grow at least two steers a year, and the steers will sell for \$30 each. On paper the wealth to be had from that black soil back of the swamp, to the east of Limon, was beyond the dreams of avarice.

At Hornellsville the Central American Colonial and Mining Company was formed. Reynolds and a man named Dawson went out and located a concession of 220,000 acres on the Sixaola River, back of the bay mentioned. On paper that was a princely domain. The sawmill was to yield at least \$150 a day in gold from the first day the engine was turned over. And the land, as cleared, was to yield at least \$100 an acre net profit after it had been two years planted. Just think of 200,000 acres of land that would yield \$100 an acre profit a year—would yield the colony an annual income of \$20,000,000 a year! That was wealth worth working for sure enough. A party that included seven families and a number of young men, all eager for the millions, quickly followed. A surveyor went along. They landed on the beach and they crossed the swamp on a footpath of flattened logs, undismayed by the alligators and snakes. They surveyed out a town on the land, that was somewhat higher than the swamp, and christened it Hornella [present-day Talamanca?]. They employed negroes and Indians, who helped them to build a house for common use and to clear away the all-but-

solid covering of vegetation. The sawmill had not arrived, and the banana plants had not yet been set out, but everybody worked with a will and was happy for a time. But a turn came very quickly. The party had left Hornellsville in the month of May—a month during which the rains of the wet season had already begun to fall on their future home. When they arrived out, the rains were falling more frequently and for more hours every day. Six weeks later, rains that lasted three days at a stretch, and longer, were pouring down, and the quantity of water that fell was appalling to the unaccustomed colonists. The land where their house stood was indeed beyond the reach of high water from the swamp, but the torrents from above permeated it and turned every foot of it into a mass of black slime. Even the ground under their house became semi-liquid.

That was not all. Their house was but a thatched roof supported on poles. It had neither walls nor floor. One could not leave his hammock or bunk without stepping into the mire. On every side rose the dense wall of the tropical forest, a wall now rendered dim by the curtains of rain that seemed to hang over all the clearing. The thatched roof leaked, and unexpected streams drizzled and poured down on those beneath. And then came mosquitoes in clouds, and gnats and flies and the red ticks that burrow in the flesh. The fires would scarcely burn. The air was so laden with moisture that even the clothing the people wore was constantly saturated. Clothing dried at the fire became saturated after it had been worn an hour. Every shoe and bit of leather was covered with mold, and every iron and steel surface became coated deep with rust. They were hemmed in by the rain and the heat. There was no escape. They could not forget their sorrows in labor. They could at the last only cower under their crude shelter and bemoan their unhappy lot.

Then came the curse of the swamp belt—the malarial fever. One after another sickened under the strain, and some found relief in death. Flesh and blood could not endure it all. From moaning over one's troubles to cursing another as the author of them, is but a step. Quarrels broke out. Hope ceased. The colony was abandoned. The dead were buried in the mud and the survivors fled. They had come to what had seemed a paradise; they had found it a liquid sheol,² peopled with winged and crawling devils. Only Mott remained, and he, it is said, has

² Sheol — Abode of the dead (from Hebrew)

almost as great cause to regret the influx as anyone, for, though he was acclimated and unaffected by rain or fever, he sold goods on credit for which the colonists could not pay, until he lost about everything he had saved.

I found Reynolds at a hotel built as a summer and health resort at Hot Springs, near Cartago. He was serving with success as a bartender. I found Jacob working as an assistant to a photographer at Alajuela. Both said that on the whole they were glad they came to Costa Rica, but Herder was sure the title to the 220,000 acres of land would never be earned by the colony company—that the promoters would never get the required number of people to live there. Reynolds, on the other hand, was sanguine of success. A Texas company had brought a sawmill, and employed people accustomed to the swamps of the Gulf States to work it. Other people who were acclimated were coming in to work on a small canal one mile long across the swamp, for which, he said, the capital had been raised. But the foreigners with whom I talked all spoke doubtfully about the project. The trees were there, they said, and the market for lumber was within reach, but only negroes, with here and there a strong-livered white man, could live in the swamps in the wet season, or even the dry. It would not be difficult to make the sawmill highly profitable. That had been done elsewhere on the coast, but to create a colony there was a very different matter.

In Honduras, the foreign element were lamenting the failure of a colony that had been exploited in Chicago. The promoters got a concession of banana land on the north coast, and then, by advertising, got people together for a colony. This entire affair was said to have been a swindle, but I found no proof of anything worse than ridiculous enthusiasm.

The failure of these two colonies does not prove that every colony sent there must fail, but of one thing the reader may rest satisfied: Every colony of Americans unaccustomed to life in the hot swamps of the States will fail in the banana region of Central America. This is not my individual judgment alone, but the judgment of every resident, native and foreign, in Central America, to whom I talked on the subject, excepting only Mr. Reynolds.

On the other hand, a colony might very easily succeed on the highlands. If such a gathering of people as settled Greeley, Col., or Riverside, Cal., or Topolobampo,

Mex., should locate on well-selected land on the plateaus, and would go to work Yankee fashion, there is no telling what they might not accomplish. They would certainly have to work hard till the ground was cleared if they did not get land already cleared; but, after all, clearing away the forest there is not what it was in the States years ago. The natives clear fresh land for every cereal crop they grow. They back it over, let it get dry, apply a match, and away it goes. The big trees—at least the big logs—remain, but they can plant between them without ploughing and be absolutely sure of an excellent crop. The Yankee would, of course, soon get rid of the logs and put in the plough. If coffee land were chosen and properly worked independence would be quickly assured, though this is not to advise any of THE SUN's readers to form a colony and go there now. There are millions of acres in Central America quite equal to the Riverside region of California, but they are not under a Government like Uncle Sam's, as Riverside is, and until they are, it is not advisable for ordinary citizens to go there either singly or in colonies.

But, although the few colonial schemes of which one hears there have all failed because wretchedly managed from the start, there are many instances of remarkably successful individual foreigners. There are dozens of foreigners—perhaps hundreds—in every one of the little Central American States that have acquired wealth. Some have succeeded as planters, a few—very few—as miners, now and then one as a merchant, and some as manufacturers. Nearly all American dentists and photographers there have succeeded. Banking, railroad-ing, lumber making, steam boating, and electric lighting have been successfully followed by foreigners. A great many poor men have gone there to invest their thrift, energy, and foresight and have succeeded marvelously. One hears about these successes on every hand, but of the individual men who have gone there on a venture and have found themselves unfitted for the conditions to be met one does not hear so much. It is not enough that a man have thrift, energy, and foresight. Without these qualities he cannot succeed, but he must be able in addition to adapt himself to the habits of a people who are very much different from those one meets in the United States. The people very properly regard a foreign fortune hunter as an adventurer who is not to be trusted until he has proved himself worthy of trust. One must overcome the natural prejudice which they feel toward a heretic. One must be able to meet half way the really sharp business men there, who will strive to overreach him in every way—must

meet deceit and fraud with inflexible integrity and strength of character, and yet must avoid offending by either an arrogant bearing or blunt denunciation of the habits of those by whom he is surrounded. More than all else, one must be able to command the respect and admiration of the peon or working class, and that is a right difficult thing to do. The peons seem to be in one respect like the darkies of the Southern States. The old master or young master can order the darkies around, get a lot of work out of them, and make them salute him with the utmost respect whenever they see him. The Northern Yankee cannot do half so well, though he pay double price. So, the Central American gentleman can get his work done for a trifle where an ordinary foreigner cannot hire a hand at any price. I saw one young San Francisco man who had abandoned a promising young coffee orchard, and was on his way home because he could not get help, and that, too, after he had worked for two years on the place with own hands. It only remains to be said that in spite of the fact that great wealth has been acquired there by foreigners after a few years of labor, the chances of failure are very much greater than those of success, so far as ordinary men are concerned, and that only those who can find in the knowledge gained and the adventures they will meet a sufficient return for their time and money ought to think of going there.

In connection with what has been said about foreigners in Central America it is proper to add a few words about the ever-present proposition to incorporate some part of Spanish America—Cuba, for instance—into the United States. Every Cuban patriot and a very large number of intelligent people in every Central American State look with longing eyes toward the Yankee republic. Even among politicians there it is believed that it would be better for the country and for themselves if they were under the Stars and Stripes. It is true that the average politician's ambition is to rule his country long enough to acquire wealth, and then go to Paris, like Guzman Blanco of Venezuela or Soto of Honduras or Ezeta of Salvador. But many have wider views. They would like to sit in Congress at Washington as "the gentleman from Costa Rica." They know that the time would even come when the candidate for the Presidency would be chosen from the new State in the south. On the other hand, many people in the United States would very seriously object to the annexation of any Spanish-American country to the United States on the ground that a population so very different from the average Yankee could not be well assimilated even under the flexible

system of the American republic. It is urged that adding such people to the great American nation would not change their habits of life or thought, and I do not see any way of denying this assertion. As the population of the Spanish-American countries now are they would not make good American States. They are too much accustomed to military rule. Nevertheless, the best thing that could happen both to them and to the United States is annexation, and this for the reason that the moment the new Government was established the best part of the North American continent would be open to Yankee settlement and enterprise. The idle millions of rich acres there would be taken up by the enterprising home-seeker, and they would be taken up as rapidly as the rich lands of the Mohawk and of the Wyoming were taken when peace began to reign there. An era of development that would stir the Union would follow. Such a rush of home-seekers, planters, miners, railroad builders, real estate agents, and town-site boomers would set in as the country has not yet seen.

The United States would be benefited by the relief this would afford to somewhat congested regions and industries. The newly added State would be benefited by having all the conveniences and luxuries of modern civilization brought to the doors of the people. The change which these doings would work in the new State would entirely wipe out all objections which may now be urged against annexation. Could the Central American States enter the American Union they would become, I have no doubt, as thickly populated as Ohio is, within ten years, and their wealth-producing capacity would be increased a thousand-fold. And only the prejudices due to ignorance and selfishness prevent this consummation devoutly to be wished.

JOHN R. SPEARS.

o - O - o